The Mysterious House

Mrs. O. F Walton

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'LET GRAN JUST SING A VERSE OF HER HYMN,' HE PLEADED.
[*p.* 85.

THE MYSTERIOUS HOUSE

BY

MRS. O. F. WALTON

AUTHOR OF 'A PEEP BEHIND THE SCENES' 'CHRISTIE'S OLD ORGAN' 'CHRISTIE, THE KING'S SERVANT' 'LITTLE DOT' ETC., ETC.

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THE MYSTERIOUS HOUSE.

CHAPTER I.

AT THE CASTLE GATE.

She was pacing up and down the street, first on one side and then on the other; she was waiting for the great gate to be opened, and she was waiting patiently, as only women can wait. She had gazed again and again at the high walls towering over her head; she had looked at the strong buttresses standing like stern sentinels around the fortress; she had crossed the road, and had peered at the towers inside the wall; she had stood on the bridge close by, and watched the dark sluggish river creeping along laden with grimy coal-barges and boats too old and weather-beaten to be trusted on a larger

stream; she had counted the church towers in the city, and had tried, in all manners of ways, to make the time pass quickly, but still the weary hours dragged on and the gate was not opened.

It had been early morning when the woman first came there, and now the day was far advanced, but still she waited on. Once she had run down a side street, and had crept into a baker's shop, and had hastily bought a bun to keep away the pangs of hunger; but in a minute's time she had been back at her post, and she had never allowed herself to lose sight of the gate again.

The cathedral bells had chimed every quarter of an hour, and the bell of the great clock had struck the hours one after another; and her steps had grown slower and slower as the time went on; but, weary though she was she never thought of going away, or of ceasing to keep her watch on the great iron gate.

She was a tall thin woman, with a sorrowful face and with a restless anxious eye, and on her brow were many wrinkles and marks of care, although she could not have been more than forty years of age.

It had been a bright morning, with a clear sky and a sharp north-east wind; but as the

day wore on, the sky was overcast, and at length a drizzling rain fell.

The streets became very empty after this, and the woman's walk was more and more lonely. She drew her thin shawl more tightly around her, and she shivered sometimes, and tried to shake the rain from her threadbare dress; but she still paced up and down, and she still kept her eye on the gate.

It was not until late in the afternoon that her weary time of waiting came to an end. Then there came the sounds of bolts being drawn back, and of a key being turned in a lock, and at length the great gate swung on its hinges and a man came out.

He was a shabby man in a ragged coat, and he had pulled his collar over his ears, and had drawn down his old fur cap to meet it, so that, if possible, he might hide his closely cropped head.

The woman crossed the road to meet him, and walked by his side over the bridge, but for some minutes neither of them spoke a word.

The man looked sullenly around him, and walked on with dogged and determined footsteps. The woman looked in his face from time to time, but seemed afraid to be the first to speak.

At length, just as they were crossing a road, he asked her a question—

"How 's Gran?"

"She 's not well," said the woman, sadly; "she has wearied for you, Robert. Night and day she has asked where you were, and why you didn't come home."

"What did you tell her?" asked the man; and there was a faltering in his voice as he asked the question.

"I told her you were away on business," said his wife. "God knows I did not mean to tell a lie. It was as near the truth as I dare go."

"And she was satisfied?"

"No, not satisfied, Robert. She asked then if you had not written to her."

"And what did you say to that?"

"I told her that you had not time to write, that you were not able to write—anything I could think of to put her off."

"Does she know I am coming to-day?"

"Yes, I told her you were coming, and that I was going to meet you, and that it might be late when we were back. It will have seemed a long day to her, I 'm afraid."

"Who have you left her with?"

They were walking down a very lonely street when he asked this last question. On

one side of it was a blank wall; on the other were old deserted warehouses, with long narrow passages between them sloping down to the river.

There was no one else in this quiet street when they turned into it, but as they were passing the first of the old warehouses, a dog-cart turned the corner of a street ahead of them and came quickly towards them. The woman was walking in front, and her husband had fallen behind her; he was walking heavily and uneasily, as one might walk who for some time had used his feet but little.

She turned round to answer his last question, and she found, to her astonishment, that he was gone; only a minute before she had heard his footsteps behind her, but now he had disappeared from sight, as suddenly and entirely as if the earth had swallowed him up.

The woman stood still for a moment, unable to account for his sudden departure, then as the dog-cart drew nearer, she walked quietly on as if nothing had happened.

There were two men in this dog-cart: one was a comparatively young man, dressed in light grey clothes, evidently a gentleman, the woman thought; and the other man, who was older and who was driving, she took to be his servant, for he was dressed in livery. She

wondered if they had noticed the disappearance of her husband, and she looked somewhat anxiously at them as they drew near. Suddenly the dog-cart stopped, and the gentleman in grey jumped out and came to meet her.

"There was a man with you when you turned into this street," he said, shortly.

"Was there?" said the woman, hanging down her head and not daring to look into the gentleman's face.

"Yes," he said, gravely, "you know that there was; where is he?"

"I don't know, sir, I don't indeed," said the woman, meekly, "I know no more than you do, sir, where he is."

The gentleman did not answer her, but he stepped hastily forward, and standing on tiptoe he peered through the broken windows of the deserted warehouse, and then ran swiftly down one of the steep passages leading to the river.

The woman stood for a moment looking after him, but as she saw that the man in the dog-cart was about to ask her more questions, she hurried on, and did not look round until she was at the other end of the long straight street. Then, before she turned the corner, she glanced back for a moment, and she saw

that the dog-cart was still standing before the warehouse, that the servant had got down from his seat and was looking in at one of the warehouse windows, but that the gentleman in grey had not yet returned.

It was with a very heavy heart that the poor wife turned away. She could not guess the meaning of her husband's sudden flight; she knew very little of his ways of life. He never told her how he earned the money that he brought her from time to time; that he made it by some dishonest means she was almost certain.

There was some secret hanging over his movements; of that she felt sure. When he went out at night, leaving her and the child alone, she would lie awake for hours listening for his return, and would creep down in the grey morning light to let him in; but he would never tell her where he had been nor what he had been doing.

It was wearing her life away, this terrible secret. For she had once loved him dearly, nay, she still loved him dearly. If she had not loved him she would not have waited for him all those long weary hours at the prison-gate.

It was the first time he had been in prison; he had been charged with wilfully passing bad

coins, but he had most solemnly declared that he had not known them to be base metal, and his wife had tried to believe in his innocence when every one else was persuaded of his guilt.

But life looked very dark to that poor woman as, with tired footsteps, she went slowly home.

CHAPTER II.

THE LITTLE BLIND KNITTER.

The lamps were lighted in the streets before the poor woman reached the narrow winding alley in which she lived A pawnbroker's shop, with its three golden balls, stood just at the entrance of Brooks' Passage, and here, to her astonishment, she found her husband awaiting her. He was standing with his hands in his pockets, looking at the articles exhibited in the pawnbroker's window.

"Come on," he said, shortly, "it 's cold."

"Why, Robert," she said, "where have you been, and what made you run off in such a hurry?"

He answered neither of those questions, but told her roughly to mind her own business and to come on.

"Oh, Robert," she said sorrowfully, "I

never thought you would speak to me like that, and after I've waited for you ever since morning, too!"

He seemed touched when she said that, and said more kindly—

"You're a good lass, Annie, I don't deny that, but you must keep a quiet tongue between your teeth."

She was going to say more, but he stopped her.

"Come on," he said, "Gran will think we're never coming."

The house before which they stopped was evidently a very old one, for the upper storey overhung the lower one some way, and the style of building was quaint and old-fashioned. On the ground floor was a second-hand clothes' shop, and Patterson, the owner of this shop, was taking down the old coats and trousers, and the faded and ragged dresses, which had been hanging out all day, and which were now becoming drenched by the heavily-falling rain.

"So you're back, Robert, are you?" said Patterson, as his lodgers passed him.

"Yes, I'm back," said Robert. "You came off cheap, Jack."

"Never mind; it will maybe be my turn next," said Patterson, as he turned up the

lights in his shop to display the shabby finery within.

The husband and wife went quietly up a narrow staircase which led to the upper storey of that ancient house. As they did so, they heard the sound of singing in the room overhead. The man was walking first, and he stopped on the stairs to listen. It was a child's voice that was singing—a clear, shrill little voice, and the words fell quite distinctly on his ear—

"My heart is fixed, immortal God,
Fixed on Thee, fixed on Thee!
And my eternal choice is made,
Christ for me, Christ for me!

He is my Prophet, Priest, and King,
Who did for me salvation bring;
And while I breathe I mean to sing
'Christ for me, Christ for me!'"

"Who taught her to sing that?" said the man, sharply, turning to his wife; but instead of answering him, she went quickly past him. and threw open the door at the top of the staircase.

"Gran, here 's father," she said.

A little cry of joy came from the small singer, and she rose from her chair and held out her arms to the man as he entered the

room. She was only nine years old, but her face might have been that of a much older child. She was not pretty, yet there was something in her face which, if you had looked at it once, made you wish to look at it again.

It was hardly a child's face,—there was too much expression and character in it; and it was because she was so old-fashioned and so thoroughly beyond her years, that the neighbours had given her the name of "Old Gran."

Yet all the expression in the child's face lay in her mouth, for the blue eyes had no expression at all. Little Gran was blind! She had never seen the birds or the trees or the flowers; she had never seen her mother's face, she knew nothing of the games and amusements of other children. But she was a wise little woman in her own way, and she noticed many things which children who had their eyesight would have passed by.

"Oh! father," said Gran with a little sob, "I have wanted you so much!"

He sat down and put his strong arm round her, and she laid her head on his shoulder.

"I've lots of things to tell you, father," she said; "I don't know where to begin."

"Begin at the beginning, Gran," he said.

'Well, here 's the beginning, father;" and

she put into his hand a parcel which she took from the table.

"Why, Gran, what's this?

"Open it, father, and look; it 's some new socks for you."

"Why, who knit them?" said the man; "they 're real beauties, that they are!"

"I knit them, father—every stitch; didn't I, mother?" said Gran, triumphantly.

"And you knit them for me, Gran?" said her father, with tears in his eyes.

"Yes, for you, father—for your very own self, and I hope you 'll have health to wear them, strength to tear them, and little Gran to knit you some more when they 're worn out."

"Well, you *have* been busy while I 've been away, Gran!"

"Haven't I, father; but that isn't all. Did you hear me singing when you came upstairs? I 've learnt such a lot of new songs—lovely ones, father, and when you 've had your tea, I 'll sing them every one to you, every one from beginning to end, I will."

"Why, who taught you them, Gran?"

"There, let father get his tea," said her mother; "don't bother him now he 's tired and cold." She was not at all sure that her

husband would be pleased with what Gran had to tell.

But he was not to be put off in that way. He said he could eat his tea while Gran talked, and he asked her again, "Who taught you to sing, Gran?"

"It was a lady, father," she said, "a track lady."

"What in the world is a *track* lady?"

"She brings tracts and books round, Robert," said his wife.

"Oh, she does, does she?" said her husband in a surly voice; "and you let her in, did you, after all I said about keeping yourself to yourself?"

"No, Robert," she said, "I didn't let her in, she came in when I was out. It stands to reason I had to go out sometimes, or we should have starved to death, and I wasn't going to lock poor Gran in; she likes to go down and have a word with Mrs. Patterson now and then, poor child—it passes the time for her."

"Well," said her husband, sternly; "well, Gran?"

"Well, father, mother was out, and I was sitting with my door a little way open singing——"

"What were you singing, Gran?"

"I was singing 'Pretty Polly Perkins,' You remember it, don't you?

'And she was—
As beautiful as a butterfly,
And as proud as a queen,
Was pretty Polly Perkins
Of Paddington Green.'

Well, I was singing that, father, when I heard footsteps coming up the stairs. I stopped to listen, and then I heard some one say—

"'What pretty little voice did I hear singing just now?' And then my fairy godmother came in."

"Who came in, Gran?"

"My fairy godmother, father. I always call her that, because she found me when I was alone, like Cinderella, and she has been just like a good fairy to me. Why she has brought me lots and lots of things, father; mother will tell you if she hasn't, and she is teaching me to read, and to sew, and to write, and to knit, only think of that father, and then, best of all, she teaches me to sing the most beautifullest hymns. Shall I sing you one of them, father?"

"No, not now, Gran, I must finish my tea," he said.

She saw he was not pleased; for Gran could see many things, although she was blind. She said nothing more, but she kept from time to time leaning forward to lay her hand on his, as if she were trying to win him back to her again. She did not know, she could not guess, what had vexed him.

CHAPTER III.

THE OLD LADY IN WHITE.

"YES, it's quite true, Nellie," said Ada, solemnly, as she and her cousin stood together in front of a large house in a fashionable square at the west end of the city; "it is a mysterious house!"

"Do tell me about it, Ada. I have been longing to know about it ever since mother had a letter from auntie, in which she told her that you liked your new house very much, in spite of its being next door to a haunted house."

"I wish it wasn't haunted all the same," said Ada; "it isn't very pleasant, especially as my bed-room is on that side of the house."

"How long has it been shut up?" Ada asked.

"Just five years now. It belongs to a German; he took it on a ten years' lease, but

he only lived in it for two months, and then he went away, saying that it was haunted, and that he could not stand it any longer."

"Who had lived in the house before?"

"Three old ladies—most peculiar people, who never went out, but who lived here for years with a tribe of cats, and were waited on by a very strange, wild-looking old woman, who did their marketing late in the evening, and who was always dressed in black, and wore a thick knitted veil. They were all supposed by the neighbours to be rather mad, but they were thought to be quite harmless."

"What became of them?"

"They all disappeared. One day the shutters were never taken down, and the people round concluded that the old ladies were from home. This went on for some time, but at last nothing having been heard of them, the police entered the house, and found one poor old lady dead in bed, in a room at the top of the house. Every room seemed to have been left undisturbed; the house was scantily furnished, yet, as far as the police could tell, nothing had been removed; but the two remaining sisters, and the old servant, and the tribe of cats had all disappeared, and from that day to this they have never been heard of.

"There was an inquest, of course, and the doctors said the old lady had died of heart disease, and it was thought that her poor half-mad companions had been so frightened by finding her dead that they had left the house the following night, and had probably gone abroad. No one seems to have suspected that anything was wrong until the German took the house, about a year after the old ladies had left it. But he started quite a fresh idea."

"What was that?" asked Nellie.

"Why, he said he was convinced that the old lady had been murdered, for he said that every night, about twelve o'clock, he heard strange rappings and noises in the house. This went on for some time, and at last he said that one night he was determined to find out what it was.

"So he took courage and went upstairs, and as he got nearer to the room in which the old lady was found dead, the rapping got louder and louder. He nearly turned back, but, being resolved to find out the cause of the hammering, he summoned up all his courage and threw open the door."

"What did he see?" asked Nellie.

"He saw an old lady dressed in white, sitting in an arm-chair by the fire, and hammering on the ground with her crutch

She disappeared when he went into the room, but he was too frightened to stay in the house after that, so he uses it merely as a storehouse to store his goods. He lives somewhere in the city, and is a general merchant, I think he told father one day."

"Well, it does look a most suitable house for a ghost story," said Nellie, as she looked up at the gloomy, rambling old house, with its tightly closed shutters and its bolted doors. "I should not have thought it was a very safe place for the German to store his goods."

"Well, I don't suppose they are very valuable things; indeed, I think he told father as much; he said his warehouse in the city was very crowded, so he was obliged to bring some of the things up here. He took father inside one day, and showed him over the lower part of the house. He does not seem to store anything on the top storey—he leaves that to the ghost, he says.

"Father once advised him to give the police a word about his property, for he saw a strange man hanging about the house one night. It was the night Freddy had the croup, and father had to go for the doctor. It was about two o'clock when he came home, and he let himself in by the garden gate at the back of the house.

"Just as he was opening the gate, he heard a noise, and to his astonishment a man climbed over the wall of the next garden. He was hurrying off when he saw father, but father stopped him, and asked what he was doing there. He said he was Mr. Zimmerman's servant, and had come to see that the property was all safe, as his master had heard that there were thieves about. Father did not like this man's manner at all, he seemed uncomfortable at father's seeing him there, and this made father mention it to Mr. Zimmerman the next time he came."

"What did he say?" asked Nellie.

"Oh, he seemed to think nothing of it. He asked father what the man was like, and father described him. You know how clever father is in remembering faces; having once seen a face, he never forgets it; and, what is more, he can describe people he has seen so well, that you feel as if you had seen them yourself. Well, he told Mr. Zimmerman what the man was like; it was a moonlight night, and he had seen him very distinctly. Mr. Zimmerman listened to his description, and then he said at once—

"'Oh yes, I thought so; it would be old Magson, an old clerk of mine. He is a good fellow, and very faithful to me; but he is of a

nervous and anxious turn of mind, and he is always wanting to persuade me that this house is not safe. I tell him that there is nothing of value stowed here; but he will insist on coming to look after it. I knew he walked round often in the evening, but I did not know he had ever been at night. I suppose he did not dare to tell me, for he knew I should make fun of him.'"

"Have you ever seen the man since?" asked Ada.

"No, never near this house; but one day, only about a week ago, father met him in a street at the other end of the city. He feels sure it was the same man; father says he has a most peculiar face. He was walking with a woman; but the curious thing is, that as soon as he saw father he disappeared."

"Where did he go?" asked Nellie.

"He ran down a passage near some deserted warehouses by the river, and father followed him, but could not find him; and the woman would tell him nothing. But come in, or we shall get quite melancholy if we stand looking so long at this miserable house."

"But, Ada, tell me one thing—have you ever heard any noises next door? You said your bedroom was that side of the house."

"Yes, Nellie, I have, more than once.

Don't tell Harry and Joe that I said so, for they do nothing but laugh when I tell them; but some nights I can distinctly hear the hammering—I am sure I can!"

"Oh, I should like to hear it!" said Nellie.

"Well, if it comes when you are here, I will wake you, and you shall come and listen in my room. But don't tell the boys; they do tease so about it. They would change rooms one night, and they sat up all night with their ears against the wall, and of course they heard nothing; and now they declare it is the beating of my own heart that I hear and talk all manner of rubbish about it."

CHAPTER IV.

A BOX FROM HOME.

"ROBERT," said his wife that night when Gran was in bed, "I've got something to tell you."

"What is it?" he asked, in a very surly voice. He had not forgotten that she had let a stranger into the house in his absence.

"Don't be vexed, Robert," she said, laying her hand in his; "I know you will feel what I am going to tell you. I didn't like to tell you before, for I knew it would cut you up so."

"Well, out with it," he said, "what is it?"

She went to a drawer, and took out a letter, and handed it to him, and he read as follows:—

"MY DEAR ROBERT,

"Mother has been taken very ill. She

has been failing for some time, but now the doctor says she will not get over it; he came twice to see her yesterday. We are all in great trouble. We want you to come at once, for mother calls for you by night and by day; she *does* want to see you again. She says it is her last wish on earth. Don't lose a single train if you can help it, for at any time a change might come. Mother has just asked me again to beg you to come at once.

"Your affectionate sister,

"ELLIE SNOWDEN."

"I must go at once," he said when he had finished the letter; "there is no time to be lost!"

"Oh, Robert," said his wife, throwing her arms round his neck, "that letter came a long time ago; I have had another one since then."

She handed him the second letter, which had a broad black border, and his hand trembled and his face turned very pale as he read it—

"MY DEAR ROBERT,

"We are very much grieved and disappointed that you did not come. What business could be so pressing as to keep you away?

And now it is too late. Dear mother died this morning; it was such a peaceful going home. The Lord, whom she loved, was very near to her. But to the very last she kept asking for you. You know the trains pass close to our house, and each time she heard a whistle, or the rumble of the carriages going by, she said, 'That will be Robert's train, Ellie; look out of the window, dear, he'll be here in a minute or two now.' But you never came, and now you will never see her in this world again. She left you her dearest love, and I was to tell you that she would stand at the gate waiting for you to come, and she did not think you would disappoint her. Oh, Robert, she *did* love you; you will come to the funeral, won't you? It is to be on Friday, and we all want you so much. We are in great trouble."

"Your affectionate sister,

"ELLIE."

He let this letter fall from his hands when he had read it, and, leaning on the table with his face buried in his arms, he sobbed aloud. His wife put her arms round his neck, but she did not speak; what could she say to comfort him? She knew that he had loved his mother intensely, and that a heavier blow than this

could scarcely have fallen on him. At last he lifted his head and said:—

"Annie, what answer did you send when that first letter came?"

"Oh, Robert," she said, "I did not know what to tell them; I could not tell them the truth, for it would have been cruel when they were in such trouble, wouldn't it?"

"I would not have them know it for worlds," he said—"not for ten thousand million worlds; but what *did* you say?"

"I said you were away from home on business, and could not possibly come. It must have seemed so cold and unkind, and I felt it was not quite true, and I hated having to write it. But what could I say, Robert? I could have gone myself, but I dared not go, for I knew they would ask me questions about where you were, and I should have been obliged to tell the truth then."

He did not answer her except by a groan.

"But, Robert," she ventured to say, "you won't disappoint mother, will you?"

"What do you mean? I *have* disappointed her."

"Yes, she looked for you, and you did not come," said his wife; "but remember her last message; she is still looking for you at

the gate, you will meet her there, won't you, Robert?"

"There isn't the least chance of it, Annie, not the least, remotest, faintest chance; even if I wanted to be different, I can't. I'm like a fly in a spider's web, I can't get out. No, I've made my choice, and I shall have to stick to it; and it will be a good thing for you and Gran, Annie. I want to make a lady of you. You've had a hard time, my poor lass, but it won't be for long. When once I've made my little fortune we'll settle down in some quiet country place, and forget all about this miserable life here."

"Robert," said his wife, "I had rather be a beggar all the days of my life than that you should do what is wrong."

"But you wouldn't have Gran a beggar," he said, "not your own little Gran?"

"Yes, I would, even little Gran," she said. "I would even see little Gran go barefooted from door to door, begging her bread, rather that have you parted from us for ever."

"Well," he said, "I don't see how I can help it now; I've made my choice, and I must stick to it. Listen, what's that?"

It was little Gran in the next room, singing herself to sleep—

"My heart is fixed, immortal God,
Fixed on Thee;
And my eternal choice is made,
Christ for Me!"

"That's Gran's choice," said his wife; "and I think it 's a better one than yours, Robert."

He did not answer her; but after a time she went into the next room, and brought out a small square box.

"Ellie sent this box, Robert," she said; "they are some things which belonged to mother that she thought you would like to have, and there is a present from mother for you."

His hand trembled as he took one parcel after another out of the box. Their value in money was not great, but he would not have parted with one of them, for he had seen each one of them in his mother's hand, and each one seemed to him to be a part of the one that was gone.

There was an old well-worn blotting book, on which she had written her letters, and as he opened it he came upon a sheet of paper, on which she had begun a letter to him—

"My dear Robert,—"It seems so long since I heard from you."

Yes, it *had* been long; how could he write with such a secret on his mind?

There was an old Russia-leather purse, which he had given her years ago for a birthday present. How pleased she had been with that purse, bought with his first earnings! she had told him she would never part with it. And she had never parted with it. How carefully she had kept it all those years!

There were besides many books which he had often seen in his mother's hands, favourite books, that she had read in her arm-chair by the fire on Sunday afternoons. He could picture her to himself reading each one; he could look at none of them without tears in his eyes.

But his tears fell very fast when he came to his mother's present, a daily text-book, which she had read aloud to them every morning as long as he could remember. How well he could hear her voice reading those familiar words! Her turned to the first page, and there, in her own writing he found these words—

"For you, dear Robert, when I am gone, and need this book no more. For mother's sake, read it every day, and may God bless it to your soul! Amen."

He found the verse for the day, March 16th, "What is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then

vanisheth away." And yet he was making his choice for this life, for this little life, so short, so uncertain, passing away like the morning mist. He was choosing what he fancied would make him happy in this little life; he was losing the life beyond. Was it a good choice?

CHAPTER V.

THE FAIRY BIRD.

"FATHER," said Gran the next morning, laying her little hand on his, "this is the day for me to go to my fairy godmother. You 'll let me go, won't you?"

"What do you do when you get there, Gran?" he asked.

"Oh, she teaches me to read, and to write, and to sew. You haven't seen my writing-frame, father. I can make all the letters now from A to Z. And then, when school is done, we have our talk."

"What do you talk about, Gran?"

"She tells me a story out of the Bible, and then I ask her questions, and after that she sings to me; then it is dinner-time, and I have meat and potato and pudding—such a dinner, father! And then mother comes for me, and

it 's time to come home. So now you know all I do from beginning to end."

"How often do you go, Gran?"

"She goes twice a week, Robert," said his wife; "and if you knew how Gran counts on it, I think you wouldn't refuse her."

He most certainly would have refused her had she asked him the evening before; but the sad news he had received, and the remembrance of his mother's voice, and the recollection of his mother's words, had kept him awake all night, and he was so much touched and softened by the memories that had crowded into his mind during the dark, silent hours of the night, that when little Gran once more pleaded with him, and said, with her arms round his neck,

"I may go, father dear, mayn't I?" he answered—

"All right, Gran; you can go if you like."

"Oh, thank you, father dear, darling father!" she said. "Mother, get my boots, please; it 's time we were getting ready."

"Where is it?" he asked. "Have you to go far?"

"Yes, it 's a long way," said his wife; "right away at the west end of the town."

"What is the name of the street?" he asked.

"It's in Grosvenor Square," she said; "there's a garden in the middle and houses all round."

"Grosvenor Square" he repeated. "I wish——"

But he did not finish the sentence; lighting his pipe, he went downstairs, leaving Gran and her mother to get ready for their walk.

Monday and Thursday were indeed bright days in little Gran's life. Ada Meredith little thought, when she set forth with a trembling heart to take the tracts round her new district, what joy she was to bring into one little sorrowful life.

There had been a mission in the church she attended, and Ada had been much touched by the solemn services. She had seen her sinfulness, she had taken Christ as her Saviour, and now she longed to do something to show her love to Him. Accordingly, when papers were put in the pews at the end of the mission with this question on them, "Would you like to do any work for God?" Ada had written "Yes" against the question, and had dropped the paper in the box at the church door.

The work had soon been found for her. It consisted in distributing tracts every fortnight in a very poor street in the east end of the city. How much she had dreaded going for

the first time! She had set out, and had turned back again more than once; but she had prayed for help, and had overcome her cowardice, and had made the effort for her Master's sake.

Ever since that first day her district had been a source of interest and pleasure to her, instead of a source of dread. She had especially enjoyed her visits to poor little blind Gran, and had talked much of her at home. Then Ada's mother had wished to see the little girl, and very soon a plan had been made, by means of which Gran not only had two lessons a week, but had two good meals, which she seemed to need quite as much.

"Miss Ada," said Gran that day, when the time for their Bible lesson came, "I sang to my father last night; he came home, and I was so glad; he has been away such a long time; and I sang all my hymns to him."

"Which did he like best, Gran?"

"He didn't say, Miss Ada; he was smoking his pipe, and he only grunted when I had finished them."

Ada laughed.

"But which do *you* like best, Gran?" she asked.

"Oh, I like '*Christ for me*'!" said the

child, clasping her hands together; "it's lovely! But, Miss Ada——"

"Yes, Gran."

"There 's one word in it I can't understand right. What does *eternal* mean? 'My eternal choice is made.'"

Ada did not answer her for a minute, and then she said—

"Gran, would you like to be able to fly?"

"Like a bird, Miss Ada? Yes, I think I should. I often think I should like to see a bird fly. Mother tells me about it; she tells me how quickly the birds go, and how easy it seems for them, and how they move their wings. One day she found a dead sparrow, and I felt it all over, and I opened and shut its wings, and mother showed me how the wings moved when the sparrow flew; and I should like to see them fly, Miss Ada.

"Mother says it 's all beautiful up over our heads in the sky, and that the birds go flying up so high, they seem like little tiny dots. But you know I can't quite understand, because, you see, I don't know what *blue* looks like, and I can 't think how a big bird could ever seem like a pin's head. You can't think how I wonder and wonder about things!"

"Poor little Gran!" said Ada, laying her hand on the child's. "I wish I could lend

you my eyes for half an hour. Where would you like to be if I could?"

"Oh, in a flower-garden," she said; "that's what I want to see most of all; the flowers all feel so pretty, and I should like to see them all."

"Well, Gran," said Ada, "think of your poor sparrows, and try to fancy a bird flying

"Yes, Miss Ada—flap, flap, flap!" said Gran, laughing, as she moved her arms up and down to imitate a bird's wings.

"I want you to try to fancy, Gran, that we have a bird in this room, and that we are going to let him fly out of the window; he is to fly on, and on, and on in a straight line; he is never to stop for a moment."

"He will be very tired," said Gran.

"Not only is he never to rest, but he is never to eat, or to drink, or to sleep; he is to do nothing but fly."

"He will be starved to death, like Mrs. Patterson's canary," said Gran.

"Yes, of course, a real bird would, Gran; but this is a fairy bird, which your fairy godmother is going to let fly."

"Oh, what fun!" said Gran. "I like fairy stories so much!"

"Well, our fairy bird," said Ada, "is to fly on till he comes to something to stop

him. Now how long do you think he will fly?"

"I don't know, Miss Ada," said Gran. "What is there up there?'

"There is air, Gran, for the first bit of the way, for about thirty miles, and then after that there is nothing—empty space, that is all."

"Then our bird will die, won't he, Miss Ada? My father once said that if we were put into a place where there was no air we should be killed."

"Yes, any other bird would die at once, Gran; but our fairy bird can live without air, and without food, and without water, and never gets tired; he will go on flying till he comes to something to stop him."

"Well, Miss Ada, when he gets past the empty space, what does he come to?"

"He flies on, Gran, till he comes to a large dark ball moving in space—that's the moon, Gran. Our bird has flown a long way when he gets to the moon—how far do you think, Gran? Two hundred and forty thousand miles!"

"Oh!" said Gran, "I can't even think of such a long way, Miss Ada!"

"But that is nothing to the distance my fairy bird has to go, Gran."

"How far has he to go, Miss Ada?"

"He will have to fly on, and on, and on for ever, Gran; he will never come to the end of space; he will never come to anything to stop his flight; space has no boundary, space has no end—it is eternal!"

"Oh," said Gran, thoughtfully, "now I see why you told me about that fairy sparrow, Miss Ada: you wanted to show me what 'eternal' meant."

"Do you understand now, Gran?"

"Yes," said the child, gravely; "'eternal' means not having an end, going on for ever, and ever, and ever."

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERIOUS TAPPING.

"FATHER," said Gran that night, when they were getting tea, "do you know what 'eternal' means?"

"Oh yes, I know," he said, laughing; "is that what this fairy godmother of yours has been teaching you to-day?"

"Yes, father; it's wonderful now, isn't it?"

"What is wonderful, Gran?"

"To think that you and me will live for ever, and ever, and ever; it makes my head ache to think of it."

"Don't you think about it then, Gran," he said; "it isn't good for little girls to think about such things."

"Oh, but I want to think of it, father, because it's true, you know, and I want to understand it better. Miss Ada says that, when millions and millions of years are gone,

I shall be alive. Now, father, just think of that!"

"Well, Gran," said her father, "I suppose you will."

"And you will too, father," said Gran, putting her arms round his neck—"you, and mother, and all of us?"

He did not answer her, he had no wish to think of that long eternity that was coming. He fidgeted uneasily on his chair, and began to ask Gran a number of questions about the family in Grosvenor Square, and her lessons there, in order to change the subject of conversation. But Gran was not to be put off.

"Father," she said, "will you and me be together all that long, long time?"

"I don't know about that, Gran," he said

"Oh, father," she went on, "I wanted so much to ask you, because Miss Ada told me that only those who have chosen to serve the Lord Jesus will be with Him then; she said that was why she wanted me so much to be able to say 'Christ for me.'"

"Well, I must be going out," said her father, hastily drawing himself away from her. "Good-night, Gran."

He could stand the child's words no longer; he felt that he must get out into the street and forget them. But, though he went out,

Gran's question haunted him. "Will you and me be together all that long, long time?" she had said.

No, they would not be together—he felt sure they would not. He seemed to see in front of him a bright, glorious path, winding through the long ages of eternity, and on that path, walking hand in hand, his mother and his sister, his wife and his child, walking gladly and happily through the brightness and sunshine of the eternal home; and he saw himself a poor lonely friendless wanderer, watching them from the darkness outside.

When it was dark, and when he felt sure that Gran would be in bed, he came home for his supper.

"Robert," said his wife, anxiously, "you are not going out to-night, are you?"

"Yes, I am," he said, gruffly, "I've an engagement."

"Oh, Robert, if I only knew where you go and what you do," she said—"if I could only feel sure there was no harm and wickedness in it, I wouldn't mind so much—no, I wouldn't mind being alone so long, though it does seem so dreary, night after night, laying awake and listening to the wind or the rain, and wondering where you are, and waiting so anxiously for you to come in."

"It can't be helped," said her husband; "I'm in for it now, and I can't back out of it even if I wanted to; and you needn't ask me what it is, nor where I go to, because I don't mean to tell you."

When all was quiet in the street, and the lights in most of the houses were out, he stole quietly downstairs and found Patterson waiting for him at the street-door. The two men went out together into the darkness. It was a wild, stormy night, the wind was driving down the street, and had blown out the lamp in front of the shop. The rain and the sleet beat in their faces as they turned the corner of the street. They had a long walk before them, and it was an unpleasant night to be out, but neither of them thought of turning back.

They spoke very little to each other on the way, and they chose the most unfrequented streets, and when they caught sight of any one in the distance they separated if possible, and walked on opposite sides of the street, or hid in some dark alley till the stray passer-by had turned the corner of the street.

Gran would have been very much astonished, if she had known in what direction her father was walking; she would have been exceedingly surprised if she had been told how often he had been in Grosvenor Square. She little

guessed, when she told him where her fairy godmother lived, how familiar the name was to him.

The two men stopped in front of the mysterious house, and after cautiously looking round in order to make sure that there was no one in sight, Patterson gave a gentle tap with one finger on the door. It was immediately opened by some one inside the house, the two men entered swiftly, and the door was closed behind them.

Many other dark figures crept cautiously up to the mysterious house that night; some were admitted by the front door, some by the back; one or two by a small pantry window at the side of the house. The ghost would have plenty of company that night, at any rate.

It was about an hour after this, that Nelly was awakened by a gentle tapping at her bedroom door.

She jumped up in bed, and said in a startled voice, "Who 's there?"

"It is only me," said Ada, as she came in with a candle in her hand. "I thought you might like to hear the old lady's crutch; she began to rap a few minutes ago—if you will come into my room you will hear her."

Nelly felt herself trembling from head to

foot, as she slipped on her dressing gown, and crept into Ada's bedroom.

The two girls crouched down on the floor and put their ears against the wall.

"I cannot hear anything," said Nelly after a few minutes' silence; "don't you think you've made a mistake, Ada?"

"Hush—listen!" said her cousin, "it often stops; it will begin again soon."

They had not to wait much longer. Clearly and distinctly, there came, a few moments later, a steady tap, tap, which went on for some eight or ten minutes, and then stopped as before.

"What can it be, Ada?" Nelly said at length. "Can it be the water in the pipes? Our pipes at home make a very funny sound sometimes."

"No, it cannot be that," said Ada, "because there are no water pipes on that side of the house."

"Then what can it be?" asked her cousin.

"Nelly," said Ada, "I don't know what it is. I don't believe in ghosts, I think it is very foolish to do so, and yet, certainly, that house next door is a mysterious house."

CHAPTER VII.

TROUBLESOME THOUGHTS.

The gray morning light was slowly stealing into the sky when Robert Snowden, little Gran's father, came quietly out of a window at the side of the mysterious house, and crept silently and cautiously underneath the bushes in the garden at the back, until he reached the wall which separated it from the narrow passage into which the garden door opened.

Here he paused for a few moments, straining his ears to listen for the slightest sound in the street beyond; but hearing nothing, he vaulted quickly over the wall and turned homewards, choosing a different way from that by which he and his companion had come, and keeping as much as possible in dark alleys and in unfrequented back streets.

Robert Snowden had often come home in this way before, and at this very hour of the morning, but he had never returned with so heavy a heart as he had that day.

"Will you and me be together that long, long time?" little Gran had asked, and her question was lying like lead, a heavy weight on his heart.

"Christ for me!" Oh, if he could say that, as Gran could! Was it too late? Did not his mother's Bible say something about sin being forgiven for Christ's sake? Ah! but then he knew sin must be given up; he could not hug his sin to his heart and have it forgiven at the same time; he could not say "Sin for me" and "Christ for me" in the same breath. Should he give it up? Should he resolve never again to go where he had been that night?

But then what would he lose? He was getting very rich. He was making money so fast and with so little trouble, that before long, and without any great effort, he would be a wealthy man. Of course he would not be able to spend his money in England, that might excite suspicion; people might ask how he had become so suddenly rich, and might try to discover how the money had been obtained.

No, he would not remain in England; he

would emigrate, and then, when he was once abroad and surrounded by strangers, there would be no fear of his being found out; he could spend his money freely on his wife, and Gran, and himself—no one would ask any questions, and he would be able to live in comfort and independence for many a long year to come.

Yes, perhaps! But *what* was it, *who* was it that made him think of that old story he had heard so often at his mother's knee when he was a little boy, the story of that man who had, like himself, grown suddenly rich, and who had said to himself, just as he had been saying, "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years, take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry."

What was it, *who* was it that made those next words ring so loudly in his ears, "But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee, then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?" Yes, that night he had had to leave it all, all the store that he had laid up for so many years to come. And so it might be with him, all his gold would have to be left behind if God sent for his soul. He could not take one single coin with him. And then would come Eternity, that long, long time of

which Gran had spoken. And in Eternity he would be a beggar.

It was no wonder that when he arrived at home he could not sleep. His poor wife had been awake nearly all night, watching and waiting and listening; he generally found her awake when he came in, but this morning she had fallen asleep from utter weariness. Her husband did not wake her, and tried to close his eyes and to forget his uneasy thoughts in sleep.

But he tried in vain, his troubled conscience would not allow him to rest. He heard every sound in the world outside, the twitter of the sparrows on the roof, the hummer at the great works close by calling the men at five o'clock, then the busy tramp of footsteps as the men passed to their work, then the noise of many wheels as carts went by to the early market. All these sounds he heard, and heard distinctly, but through them all, and above them all, he heard the uneasy and accusing voice of his own troubled conscience.

Then came a little stir in the small bed in the corner of the room. It was Gran waking up. She often woke early, and would amuse herself by singing softly till her mother woke and it was time to get up. So he was not surprised to hear her little voice, beginning to

sing one of her favourite hymns. But the words she sang came home to him with a fresh force and power after all the wretchedness of the last two hours:—

"Let others boast of heaps of gold,
Christ for me, Christ for me!
His riches never can be told,
Christ for me, Christ for me!

Your gold will waste and wear away,
Your honour perish in a day,
My portion never can decay;
Christ for me, Christ for me."

Over and over again little Gran sang the words, till he could stand it no longer. He jumped out of bed, dressed quickly, and giving Gran a kiss as he passed her bed, and bidding her not to wake her mother, he went quietly downstairs, unbolted the door, and went out. He would go into the country, and try to forget the thoughts that troubled him so much.

It was a lovely morning, the sky was clear and cloudless, and the busy city was just waking up to life and business. There was no need for him now to skulk along in byways as he had done the night before. So he kept to the main streets, and chose those which would

lead him most quickly away from houses and people.

He was not long before he found himself in the suburbs of the city; and soon leaving the houses behind, he walked by the side of a quiet little river, winding its way amongst rushes and willow trees.

But though he had left the houses behind he could not so easily get rid of the uneasy thoughts of his heart. They followed him by the river side, and troubled him there as much as they had done in his own room. Even the quiet breeze amongst the willow trees seemed to be repeating fragments of little Gran's hymn.

A great struggle was going on in his heart. Sometimes he felt so miserable that he would gladly have thrown all his money into the river, if by that means he could have brought peace to his heart. At other times he felt determined to banish thought and to cling to his ill-gotten gold.

He walked for several miles by the river-side; and then, feeling faint and tired, he turned into the high road, and made his way to a small village or hamlet which he saw on the top of a hill about half a mile away, that he might get some refreshment before turning homewards again.

There was no inn in the village, but he felt too much exhausted to attempt to walk home without food. So he turned into a long strip of country garden, which reminded him of the old home garden, in which he had played as a boy, and passing along the narrow path between borders filled with red daisies, forget-me-nots, pansies, and pink primroses, he went up to the door and knocked. He hoped to be able at least to buy a slice of bread and a cup of milk.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RUNAWAY HORSES.

No one came to open the door of the little cottage when Robert Snowden knocked, and at first he thought no one was within, but as he put his ear to the door to listen, he heard a voice calling, "Annie, my lass! Annie, my lass! Annie, my lass!" over and over again, and a minute or two afterwards the door was opened by a rosy-cheeked little maiden of about twelve years old.

"I have had a long walk this morning, my girl," he said; "would your mother let me buy a bit of food of her, do you think? A cake of bread and a bit of cheese, or anything you have going, will do."

"Annie, my lass," said the voice inside, "ask the gentleman in."

If Robert Snowden had not felt so wretched that morning, he would surely have admired

the pretty little cottage into which he had come, with the diamond-paned windows, the deep window-seats filled with plants, the handsome old-fashioned eight-day clock, the rows of china ornaments and shells on the chimney-piece, and on a long shelf which ran round the room, the patchwork cushions on the chairs, the brightly-coloured pictures on the walls. And, best of all and prettiest of all, the old woman of the house, dressed in a clean pleated cap, a lilac print gown, and a spotlessly white apron, and sitting in an arm-chair over a bright crackling fire.

"Come in, sir," she said; "so you've had a long walk, have you? From the city maybe? Ah! yes, it's a long way! I could walk it in my young days, but I can't walk it now; and Annie, my lass, she's a good girl is Annie, and a good scholar, but she's a poor walker. She can't walk half as well as I could when I was a girl."

"What can you let me have in the way of food?" asked Robert Snowden, feeling in his pocket for his money.

"Take your hand out of that pocket, sir, and we'll talk about it," said the old woman. "I haven't got anything to sell you—nothing at all, is there, Annie, my lass? But if you'll take off your hat, and sit you down and rest

yourself a few minutes while yon kettle boils, you can get a bit of breakfast with me and my grand-daughter, and heartily welcome ye 'll be."

Robert Snowden thanked her, and sat down beside her on one of the chairs with a pretty patchwork cushion.

"The kettle doesn't quite boil, granny," said the girl, as she raked the fire together underneath it.

"Don't watch it, Annie, my girl; a watched kettle never does boil, and kettles are as stubborn as human beings; if you want them to boil in a hurry, they take their time over it. No, my dear, leave it alone, the gentleman will be all the better for a bit of rest, and we will have our almanack text and our almanack hymn.

"You 'll excuse me, sir," said the old woman, turning to her visitor, "I like my regular ways; folks of my age mostly do. You see, we 're like wheels in an old rut, we can't get out of it. Now, Annie, my lass here, always reads me the text for the day of the year, and the hymn for the day of the week, off yon almanack on the wall there. We have them every morning while we 're waiting for that old kettle to boil, and by your leave we 'll have them now."

Robert Snowden could only say that he hoped she would make no difference on his account; and Annie at once went to the almanack, and after carefully finding the day of the month, she read aloud—

"This night thy soul shall be required of thee."

That text again, the same which had troubled him since early morning. Why had he turned into this cottage to hear the very words which had so troubled him?

Why? Could it have been the Holy Spirit who had sent him there?

"Ah! it's a solemn text that, Annie, my lass," said the old woman, "and the Lord may be saying it to any one of us three this morning. God grant we may be ready if the call should come to-day. Now for the hymn, Annie."

"It's Wednesday, isn't it, granny?"

"Yes, Annie my lass, to be sure; yesterday was ironing day, and this is baking day, yes, it's Wednesday sure enough, Annie."

Annie found the hymn for Wednesday, and read in a clear, distinct voice:—

"Eternity! eternity!
How long art thou, Eternity?
As long as God is God, so long
Endure the pains of hell and wrong,

So long the joys of heaven remain;
Oh, lasting joy, oh, lasting pain!
Ponder, O man, eternity."

"Ay, ay," said the old woman, "we do well to ponder eternity. 'As long as God is God!' How long will that be, Annie?"

"Always, granny," said the girl.

"Ay, for ever and ever and ever," said her her grandmother, solemnly.

"But, thank God," she went on, "it 's not only the sorrow that 's everlasting, the joy goes on for ever and ever too.

'So long the joys of heaven remain;
Oh, lasting joy, oh, lasting pain.'

"There 's the kettle, Annie, quick, my lass."

For the old kettle, after singing a quiet song all the time that Annie had been reading, had suddenly begun to splutter and bubble so fiercely that Annie had only just time to catch it from the fire before it boiled over. Then the tea was made, and the little party gathered round the small table with its snow-white cloth, and Robert Snowden was made to feel perfectly at home, and for a time forgot his uneasy thoughts as he ate hungrily of the crisp shortcake and fresh country butter

and the good curd cheese cakes which the old woman bade Annie bring from the larder for their visitor.

But when breakfast was over, when he had taken leave of the old woman, and had talked with her about his blind child, and had thanked her for her kindness, when Annie had walked with him to the gate and had given him a bunch of sweet-smelling flowers for Gran, and when he found himself on the dusty road on his way home again, all the misery of his soul came back upon him, and seemed to have increased tenfold. "This night thy soul shall be required of thee."

He heard the words repeated by the soughing of the wind in the trees, by the rumbling of distant wheels, even by the plaintive voices of the wood pigeons in the wood behind the village. And, following closely upon those words came the words of the hymn the child had read:—

> "As long as God is God, so long
> Endure the pains of hell and wrong."

It was a fearful thought. Oh, if he could escape from that terrible eternity ahead of him!

His thoughts were suddenly disturbed by the noise of horses' hoofs in the distance, and the rapid, hurried sound of wheels. Every moment the noise increased as the carriage drew nearer. Robert Snowden felt sure that something was wrong. No carriage which was going safely on its way could make as much noise as the one which he heard approaching.

A turn in the road soon showed him that he was not mistaken. An open carriage, drawn by two runaway horses, was hurrying at a headlong pace down the hill. It was a fearful sight, for the reins, which were hanging down, had caught in the leg of one of the horses, and he was kicking and plunging madly, and trying to free himself as he galloped along.

At first Robert Snowden thought there was no one inside, but at length he caught sight of a little girl who was clinging fast to the side of the carriage. His thoughts flew at once to his own little Gran. He must save this child if possible. But it was no easy task. The horses were large and powerful animals; they were foaming at the mouth, and looked wild with fright and terror. It seemed impossible to stop them.

But Snowden was so certain that there would be a terrible smash at the bottom of the hill that he determined to make at least an effort to save the child's life. He ran to meet the plunging horses, and caught hold of the reins.

CHAPTER IX.

WHERE WAS HE?

Robert Snowden was a brave man; he had been noted as a boy for his courage and daring, he was also a strong man, with good muscle and a powerful arm; but in spite of his bravery and his strength it was not possible for him to stop the mad descent of the horses. He held fast by the reins, and hung on to the head of one of them, and by this means caused them somewhat to slacken their pace; but he could not prevent the terrible crash which he felt sure would come; and when the horses fell he fell beneath them.

Help was close at hand. The child's father and mother were calling at a house not far from the top of the hill. The gentleman had been driving his wife and child, and a page had sat behind to be ready to take care of the horses when they left the

carriage; but the little girl had pleaded to be allowed to stay outside whilst they made their formal call, so they had left her in the carriage, and the page standing at the horses' heads.

All seemed perfectly safe, for the horses were usually quiet and submissive, and so they would have been on this occasion had not a steam-roller come suddenly round a corner close to the house before which they were standing. In a moment they had taken fright, and had started off at a mad gallop before the little page—who had been too much startled by the steam-roller himself to think of his horses—could recover himself sufficiently to make any attempt to stop them.

But the child's father and mother had heard the roller pass, and, rushing to the window of the drawing-room in which they were sitting, had seen the danger their little girl was in.

Help was immediately summoned; all the servants of the house ran out, but they could not overtake the carriage, nor hinder the fearful accident at the bottom of the hill.

The poor mother was too faint and dizzy with fear to walk down the hill, but the father was the first on the spot, and to his joy and amazement he found his little girl alive and

unhurt. When the carriage had gone over she had been thrown out, but she was sitting on a bank uninjured, very white, terribly frightened, but without a bone broken. But poor Robert Snowden, who had so bravely tried to stop the carriage, was lying terribly injured and quite insensible under one of the horses.

It was many hours before he recovered consciousness. When he came to himself he could not tell for some time where he was, nor what had happened to him. He awoke to a consciousness of pain such as he had never felt before, and he fancied, as he half opened his eyes, that he saw several people standing round his bed. Who they were he could not tell. He wondered if he was in bed at home, and if his wife and Gran were near him; but he did not feel to have sufficient strength to open his eyes to see.

Presently voices spoke, and they were strange voices; they seemed to be talking of him.

"It is not very likely that he will pull through," said one voice.

"To-night will decide it one way or another."

"Can nothing be done to save him?" asked a third voice.

"We are doing all we can."

"I am so grateful to him that I would gladly spend any amount of money if you can think of anything that would save his life," said the one who had asked the question.

"We are trying every means in our power," was the answer; "we can only now wait to see the result."

Then the voices died away, and all was silent. He was very ill, he felt sure of that; the doctors—if they were doctors whom he had heard talking—had evidently thought he might die. What had happened to him?

By degrees it all came back to him—his morning walk, the carriage, the wild horses, the little helpless girl, and then that fearful crash. He had been injured in some way, he did not know how, but he had never felt so ill as this before.

What would be the end of it? The voice he had heard speaking had said, "To-night will decide it one way or another." *To-night—to-night*—what did those words remind him of? *To-night*—no, that was not quite right; it was *this* night. This night what? Oh! he remembered now. It was that text he had had in his mind before the accident: "This night thy soul shall be required of thee."

A horror and a faintness crept over him as the words came across him. The text was going to be true of him. God was calling him that night, and he was not ready for the call. He could think no more; the fearful dread took away the small amount of strength that had returned to him, and he became unconscious again. When he next came to himself all was very still.

He was able to open his eyes now, and also to look round him. Where was he? In the middle of a long row of beds, all occupied.

It must be the hospital. He had been in the hospital once to see a friend of his. Yes; he remembered it quite well. His friend had died in the hospital, and he had gone to his funeral. And now *he* had been brought to the hospital to die, and his friends would go to his funeral.

Who was that moving quietly about? Was it his wife? No, of course it could not be Annie, she would not be allowed to stay there at night; it must be the nurse.

Yes, it was the nurse, for she noticed that he moved, and came to him and gave him a cooling drink.

"You are better," she said, gently.

"Am I?" he groaned.

"Yes," she said, "but you must keep very still; just rest quietly and try to sleep."

"How can I rest when I am so miserable?"

"Why are you miserable? You have done a brave deed," she said, "you ought to be very thankful for that."

There was something which seemed familiar to him in her voice, as she bent over him in her white cap. It was not his wife. No, it was not like Annie at all; but he thought he had heard the voice before. He gave her no answer, and she moved away to another bed.

When she came round to him again he was still awake. His body and his arms were bandaged, and he could not move them, but his head was turning restlessly on the pillow.

"Not asleep?" said the gentle voice of the nurse. "Can I do anything for you?"

"Tell me—am I going to die?" he whispered.

"We hope not," she said.

"Then you think I shall get better?"

"I cannot tell," she said quietly; "only God knows that."

He gave a groan, and turned his head away, Soon afterwards she saw his lips moving, though his eyes were closed. She thought

he was asking for something, and she bent over him to listen. But he was only repeating in a whisper the words which were for ever coming into his mind: "This night thy soul shall be required of thee."

"Oh, Robert," said her gentle voice, "if you are afraid to die, think of the Saviour holding out His arms to receive you. He has waited for you so long."

"It is too late," he moaned—"too late! A little time ago I might have come to Him, but it is too late now."

"No, not too late, never too late on this side of the grave," she said. "Think of the Lord's own words: 'Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.'"

CHAPTER X.

INSIDE THE MYSTERIOUS HOUSE.

"WILL you say a prayer for me?" asked Robert Snowden the next time the nurse came round. All was still in the ward, every one seemed to be asleep, as the nurse bent over him and said in a whisper:

"O Lord, save him. We have loved him much, and prayed for him often, but Thou hast loved him far more, and Thy prayers for him have never ceased. Oh! save him to-night."

Who was this that was speaking? Was he dreaming, or was his mind wandering? It seemed so like his mother's voice, and yet his mother was dead. But she had called him Robert; he had not noticed it at the time, or in his weakness and anxiety it had not struck him as strange that she should do so, but he

remembered it afterwards, and now she said she had often prayed for him.

He opened his eyes and looked her straight in the face. No, it was not his mother, this was quite a young woman, but, as he looked at her, he saw that her eyes were full of tears.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am Ellie, your sister; I have been a nurse for some time," she said. "I went home to nurse mother, and then I was sent here. I only arrived yesterday."

"Just in time to nurse me," he said. "Oh, Ellie——" He had not seen her for many years, he would not have known her if he had met her in the street, but the sound of her voice, and the recollection she brought before him of his mother and his home, were too much for him in his weak state, and he burst into tears.

"Hush, hush, dear," she said, gently, "you will be worse if you cry. Just run into the Lord's open arms and rest there, and think of nothing else till morning."

"I will, Ellie darling, I will," he said; "oh, I will."

It was not long after this that he fell asleep.

It was a quiet, restful sleep, and lasted for many hours. When he awoke he found that his sister was gone, and that another nurse

was in charge of the ward. She brought him some milk as soon as she saw he was awake, and when she had gone the man in the next bed asked him how he felt.

"Better," he said; "much better than last night."

And, as he said the words, his eyes filled with tears, for he remembered how God had spared him, and had not sent for his soul when he was unprepared and unforgiven.

"It's visiting day to-day," said the man; "the doors will be opened directly for visitors. Will you have any to see you?"

Oh yes, he felt sure his wife would come, and Gran, his own little Gran, she would come, and stroke his face and comfort him. But did they know of his accident? Who would tell them where he was? He had not thought of that before. If they did not know, how frightened they would be when they found he did not return. He beckoned the nurse to him.

"Does my wife know I am here?"

"I can't tell," she said; "I only came to this ward to-day. I have been nursing in the female wards."

After this he was too tired to talk more, but he lay watching the door, hoping to see his wife and Gran come in. But although the

door was opened many times, and one visitor after another came to see the other men in the ward, no one came to see him. He felt very lonely and desolate, he would have given anything for a sight of Annie or Gran.

The man in the next bed had several visitors. His wife and his daughter, and his wife's niece, and one of his fellow-workmen, all came to see him. His friend was a very talkative man, and seemed determined to cheer his old mate by giving him all the news of the day.

"Tom," he said "I've brought thee a newspaper, there's something worth reading in it."

"What is it, Bill? Anything about them Russians? I always keep an eye on them, they're for ever up to something or other."

"No, Tom, it isn't the Russians this time, it's nearer home than them."

"Then it's Fenians, Bill," cried Tom. "I'll be bound it's Fenians, my lad."

"No, it isn't Fenians neither," said his friend, laughing; "it's not so far off as that; it's in this fine city of ours."

"Well, out with it, Bill: who's been after what?"

"Why, it's a queer story; shall I read it to you?"

He pulled the paper out of his pocket, and read in a loud voice—

"Srange Discovery in Grosvenor Square."

Robert Snowden started as the words fell on his ear, and with a white and agitated face he listened to every word which followed.

"For some time back the police have had their eye on a certain mysterious house in Grosvenor Square. The house was rented by a German, who had taken it on a lease for seven years. But after residing in the house for some months, Mr. Zimmerman declared it was haunted, and that he dare not live in it longer. He does not seem to have attempted to sublet the house, for he found it useful (so he told the neighbours and all to whom he had the opportunity of speaking of it) as a storehouse, to relieve his overcrowded City warehouse.

"This story served to account in the neighhood for the frequent arrivals of casks and barrels and wooden boxes at the mysterious house, as the haunted house came to be called by the inhabitants of Grosvenor Square.

"But the police have for some weeks had their suspicions aroused with regard to the use the German made of this house; they have been under the strong impression that the ghost story was a pure invention, and that

more important and more mischievous things went on in the mysterious house than the tappings of an old lady's stick, or the appearance of an old lady's ghost.

"How they came to this conclusion, and how they managed to turn their suspicions into firm convictions, will probably come to light when the case comes before the Court. At present all that is known is, that last night a body of police were in hiding in the garden in the middle of Grosvenor Square; that from their hiding-place amongst the bushes and trees they distinctly saw several men enter the mysterious house soon after midnight, some by the door, others by the window; that at length they cautiously entered the house themselves by a back entrance, and passing quickly upstairs, they heard the sound of subdued voices proceeding from one of the upstairs rooms.

"Suddenly throwing open the door, they came upon a strange scene; the whole room was filled with gold; piles of golden sovereigns stood on the table, sacks of sovereigns stood against the wall, boxes full of sovereigns lay on the floor.

"The police discovered that they had come upon a gang of coiners. The money with which the room was filled was of two kinds—

base metal, which had been manufactured by these men or their accomplices; and coin of the realm, which had been obtained in various parts of England in exchange for the counterfeit sovereigns, and which had been brought there to be divided by the German amongst his agents.

"But Zimmerman is a man who has evidently imposed upon his accomplices as much as he has upon the public. He had persuaded his gang that it would excite suspicion if they banked their money themselves; and therefore whilst an account was kept of what each man was supposed to possess, all the sterling money was sent to the bank, and placed there to Zimmerman's account.

"Doubtless he had intended shortly to disappear with the money, leaving his accomplices sharers of the guilt, but not sharers of the spoil. Zimmerman and his companions were immediately handcuffed, and taken off by a party of the police, whilst the rest remained to lock up and to guard the mysterious house, with its piles of gold and its secret hoards of forbidden treasure.

"It seems that the neighbours have occasionally heard sounds at night in the haunted house, and doubtless the tappings and other

noises, which were attributed to the ghost, were occasioned by the counting of the money, and the hammering of the nails to fasten down the wooden lids of the boxes, in which the base metal was packed to be sent to other parts of England.

"It appears that the actual coining was not carried on in Grosvenor Square, but the mysterious house was used as a storing place for the money and as the rendezvous of the conspirators.

"Great excitement prevails in the neighbourhood of the haunted house, and all are eagerly looking forward to the disclosures which will be made at the trial."

CHAPTER XI.

THE CROWD IN GROSVENOR SQUARE.

Mrs. Snowden had indeed been terribly anxious when the day wore away and her husband did not return. Gran was quite sure that he had come home the night before, and that he had spoken to her before he went out; but that was all that she could hear of him, and he was always so anxious that his movements should be kept secret, that she did not like to make any inquiries about him from others.

Then night came, and still there was no news of him. She could not sleep, nor could she even go to bed, but she sat up all night, waiting and watching. Morning dawned, and still her husband did not return.

It was the day for Gran to go to her fairy godmother's house, and not wishing to disap-

point the child by withholding from her what was her greatest treat, she dressed her and took her to Grosvenor Square.

When they arrived there, they found to their astonishment that the square was crowded with people. "What has happened, I wonder?" said Gran's mother aloud, as she tried to fight a way for herself and her blind child through the crowd.

"It is that house there," said a man, pointing to a dismal-looking house with closed shutters, which stood next to the one she was making for; "they took them last night!"

"Took who last night?" she asked.

"A lot of coiners. The rascals used to meet in that house, and to store up their bad money there. Ay, it's a good job they're caught; they'll get a pretty heavy sentence, I should say."

His words fell like lead on Annie Snowden's heart. Could this be Robert's secret? Was this gloomy house the place to which he had come night after night? Was it possible that he, whom she loved better than life itself, could have sunk so low as that? And oh, was he even now in prison, awaiting his trial—a trial for such a fearful crime that it made her shudder to think of it? She could hardly steady herself sufficiently to ring the bell and

to give Gran into the charge of the servant who opened the door.

Then, after struggling through the crowd again, she went home to find her worst fears confirmed. Patterson had been taken amongst the coiners, and the news had been brought to his wife. She was standing at the shop door, crying aloud like a child when Annie Snowden returned.

Still there was no news of Robert. Patterson had been his companion, and she could feel very little doubt now that she had found out his guilty secret, but yet no one had brought her word that he was in prison, and she did not like to ask, for fear of rousing suspicion.

It must have been about four o'clock in the afternoon that she heard a gentle tap at her door, and, on opening it she saw standing there a nurse from the hospital. She asked her to walk in; but she was very much surprised when the nurse suddenly threw her arms round her neck and began to cry.

It was Ellie, and her sorrowful tale was soon told, and it brought some comfort to the poor wife's heart. Robert was still alive, he was not yet in prison, and, best of all, he was sorry for his sin, and was praying to be forgiven.

As soon as she had been to Grosvenor

Square and had brought Gran home, they both set out together for the hospital. Ellie begged for them to be admitted, although it was past the time for visitors. Every one in the ward looked touched as the poor wife came in, leading her blind child by the hand.

Robert Snowden was much worse than he had been in the morning. The news he had heard had agitated him so much that fever had set in, and the doctors thought him very seriously ill. His wife and little girl were only allowed to see him for a few minutes. He looked up as they came in, and held out his hand, and as his wife bent over him to kiss him, he sobbed, "Oh, Annie darling, forgive me."

Then little Gran came to him, and said, "Father, I shall pray God every day to make you better."

"And ask Him to forgive me, Gran, all my sin, and to help your poor father to say '*Christ for me.*'"

"You must not talk," said the nurse, drawing near, "you must keep quiet, or the fever will grow worse."

"Yes, we ought to go, Robert," said Annie.

"Let Gran just sing me a verse of her hymn," he pleaded, "it would do me more good than anything."

So the blind child sat on the bed and

sang, and all the sick men in the ward listened to her, and were soothed by the sweet voice of the little singer. As for her poor father, the words which Gran sung came home to his very heart—

"In pining sickness or in health,
Christ for me, Christ for me!
In deepest poverty or wealth,
Christ for me, Christ for me!
And in that all-important day,
When I the summons must obey,
And pass from this dark world away,
Christ for me, Christ for me!"

The next day the fever had somewhat abated, but Robert Snowden's mind was still very uneasy. He could not rest till he had confessed his sin, it was lying like a heavy burden on his soul.

There was a young doctor who was very kind to him. He was one of the house surgeons of the hospital, and he would often sit by his side and talk with him. Once or twice Robert had been on the point of telling this doctor what was passing in his mind, but each time that he had tried to tell him, shame and fear had held him back.

But at last the way was made easy for him.

"Snowden," said the doctor, "have you anything on your mind? It seems to me as

if you had, for as soon as the fever abates a little, it is sure to return. I can't help thinking you are troubling about something."

Snowden burst into tears. "I ought to be in prison," he said; and then the whole story came out. He made no secret of it; the other men in the ward heard what he said, but he did not want them to be in ignorance; now that he had begun to confess his sin, he was willing to bear all the shame and disgrace which that confession might bring. It was hardest of all to see his sister's tears, which she tried in vain to keep back, as she moved about the ward that night.

But he was much happier now that the confession was made, happier even when next day his account of his own share in the crime was taken down and signed by him, that it might form part of the evidence at the coming trial.

Nor did the sense of relief from a burden that had long pressed upon him, depart when a warrant was brought for his arrest, and when he was summoned to appear in court so soon as he was well enough to be moved from the hospital. It was not the punishment of his sin which he now feared, it was the sin itself; the sense of guilt was at times almost more than he could bear.

"Oh, Ellie," he said that night, "is there, can there be forgiveness for such a sinner as I am?"

"'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins,' Robert," she whispered. "He is *faithful*, because He has promised, and cannot break His word; He is *just*, because the Lord Jesus has been punished instead of us, and He cannot punish us over again for the sins He bore. Tell Him all about it, dear, just as you would tell me. The Holy Spirit will help you, if you come in simple faith to the Lord Jesus, and ask Him to save you. He is close beside you, He will hear all you say, and oh, He is longing to save you from your sin."

CHAPTER XII.

CHRIST FOR ME!

The days wore away, but Robert Snowden did not recover. There had been internal injuries, the doctor said, and nothing would save his life. It soon became clear to all those who saw him that the warrant which had been served on him would never be put into execution, but that he was soon to appear before a higher Court than any earthly tribunal; that he would soon have to obey a far more important summons, and that the waiting time was growing very short.

Yes, Robert Snowden's soul was required of him, and he knew it. It was not kept a secret from him, but the dreadful horror he had felt before was gone. "I am a great sinner, but Jesus is a great Saviour," was the language of his heart. He was very humble, very patient, very thankful for all that was done for him,

very grateful to those who came to see him from time to time as he lay on his bed of pain.

He had several visitors. His wife came whenever she was allowed to do so. Poor Annie, those words of St. Paul, "Sorrowful. yet always rejoicing," seemed just to describe the state of her mind. It was terrible to lose him, but, oh, the joy of knowing that he was walking on the narrow path, and that they would spend eternity together in the Father's Home.

Little Gran always came with her mother, and sang all her hymns to her father. But "Christ for me" was his favourite to the very last. He often repeated it to himself when Gran was not there. Often, as Ellie bent over him in the quiet night, she heard him repeating softly to himself—

"And in that all-important day,
When I the summons must obey,
And pass from this dark world away,
Christ for me, Christ for me!"

But Robert Snowden had other visitors.

The fairy godmother came to see him very often, and read to him sometimes for an hour at a time, and he was soon as fond of her as his little daughter had been. Then her father came with her to the hospital, and

recognised in Snowden the man whom he had seen lurking about the mysterious house, and who had fled at the sight of him near the old warehouses.

But amongst his most regular visitors were little Marjorie and her father. She was the child whose life he had saved by so bravely checking the pace of the two runaway horses. The little girl was only six years old, but she had a grateful heart; and she was so much touched by what "the kind man," as she called him, had done for her, that she was constantly pleading with her father to take her to see him, and they brought with them flowers and fruit and other things to tempt his appetite or to cheer his dying bed.

Mr. Trevor, little Marjorie's father, was deeply grateful for what Robert Snowden had done, and in one of his visits he lifted a great weight of care and anxiety off the sick man's heart, when he promised him to be a friend to Annie and to poor little Gran, and to see that when he was gone they should both be well provided for.

It was a lovely evening in the middle of May on which the call came for him. His wife and little Gran had been with him all the afternoon, sometimes silently watching him, sometimes talking to him in subdued voices,

unheard by the other men in the ward. Then he fell asleep, and they did not move nor speak lest they should awaken him. The nurse drew near once and shook her head, and when the time came for all visitors to leave the hospital, she said gently to Annie Snowden, "You had better stay, I think."

After a time he opened his eyes and said—

"Sing, Gran—sing."

"What shall I sing, father?" she asked.

"'Christ for me,'" he whispered.

So Gran sang; her clear sweet voice did not tremble, for she could not see his face, and she did not know that the end was near. He seemed to listen all through the hymn, and when she came to the last verse he opened his eyes again.

"In pining sickness or in health,
Christ for me, Christ for me!
In deepest poverty or wealth,
Christ for me, Christ for me!
And in that all-important day,
When I the summons must obey,
And pass from this dark world away,
Christ for me, Christ for me!"

So sang the little blind child as she sat by her dying father's side.

"Christ for me, Christ for me, Christ for me!" he repeated. They were his last words;

a few minutes afterwards he had obeyed the summons; he had passed from this dark world away: he had left the things of time behind that he might enter upon the long, long eternity of which he had thought so much lately.

Little Gran was fatherless. She could hardly believe that her father was gone, and was very unwilling to leave him. Ellie went back with them to their desolate home, and stayed all night to comfort and to help them, and she taught Gran to think of her father as no longer suffering and weak, but full of joy and peace in the presence of his forgiving Lord.

But no one spoke to her of her father's sin; Gran never knew the story of the mysterious house. She had no painful recollections of the father she had loved, and as she talked of him and of his great love for her, no dark shadow clouded the memory of the past.

There were peaceful and happy days in store for Gran and for her mother. Mr. Trevor did not forget his promise to the dying man, who had lost his life in saving that of his child. He was a wealthy man, and lived in a large house in the very village to which Robert Snowden had taken that early morning walk on the day of his accident.

There was a lodge at the park gates, which happened to be vacant at that very time, and Mr. Trevor made this pretty ivy-covered cottage ready for Mrs. Snowden and her child. He stocked it with everything they could need or which might add to their comfort. There was even a light straw chair for Gran, which could be lifted out under the trees of the park, and a straw table on which she could lay her knitting or her writing-frame, as she stopped to listen to the singing of the thrushes and the blackbirds overhead, or the cawing of the rooks in a large rookery just outside the gates, or the happy peaceful cooing of the wood-pigeons in the woods beyond.

The country sounds fell gently and peacefully on the blind child's ear, and had in them no echo of an accusing conscience, as they had had for Robert Snowden when he had heard them in his early walk.

Gran loved the birds, and she loved the flowers in the garden behind the lodge; she revelled in the sweetness of the roses and the mignonette, the lavender and the sweet-peas. She would sit for hours wondering what each was like, and trying to picture to herself the lovely world which she had never seen.

Gran had many friends. Annie, the little maiden at the cottage on the hill, would often

bring the blind child to see her old grandmother, and Gran learnt all the hymns on the almanack, and was especially fond of the one about eternity which had struck her father so much the day he had heard it. It always reminded her of her fairy godmother, and of the bird which flew on for ever and ever.

As for little Marjorie, she was constantly running in and out of the lodge, and she could never enjoy anything herself without wanting to share it with Gran. Such a careful little girl she was, that Gran's mother could happily trust her blind child to her care; and many a pleasant ramble they had amongst the trees of the park, and by the side of the little rushing streams which crossed it in all directions and came tumbling over mossy stones between fern-covered banks.

Aunt Ellie always came to the lodge for her well-earned holiday; and it was a restful place for the tired nurse to come to—her earthly paradise, she used to call it.

But she and Gran and Gran's mother often talked together of the heavenly paradise, the city of God above, where they hoped to spend that long, long time that was coming. They often spoke of the glad days to which they were hastening, when Gran, little Gran, would be blind no longer, but would see the King in

His beauty, and would see with her own eyes the land that is very far off.

They often spoke of those who had gone before, and who were waiting for them amongst the white-robed multitude, washed from every stain of sin, and made white in the blood of the Lamb.

Once there, they would go no more out—for they would be for ever with the Lord.

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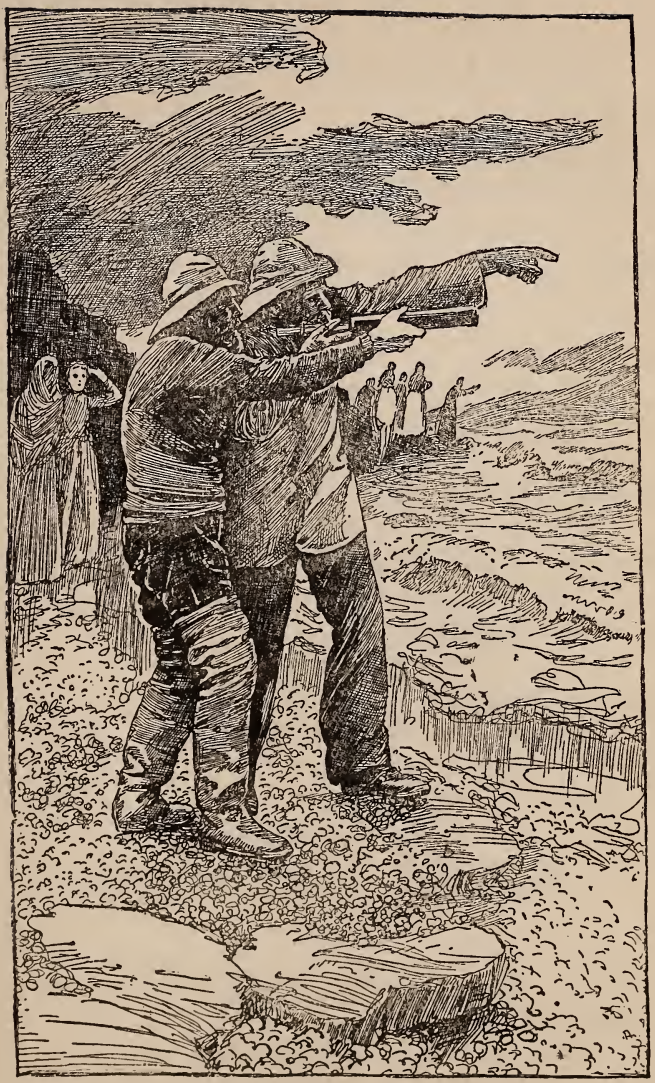

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